

Music and Musical Research

BY K. V. RAMACHANDRAN

It is a gratifying sign that in recent years has arisen a widespread interest in music, and music is slowly but surely coming by its own. Thanks to this interest, the number of music teachers is distinctly on the increase; music *sabhas* are multiplying; the number of gramophone companies which register Indian music, is growing every year; the radio claims thousands of votaries, and lectures on the theory of music are coming into fashion. All this, however, is not an unmixed blessing. Music hunger is as inevitable as hunger of any other kind, but it behoves us to see that the fare offered by *sabhas* and gramophone companies is not altogether indifferent, though a public none too particular keeps nodding through every grade of good and bad music. If we realised the inappropriateness of Demos setting the pace in music, and the unnatural position that there are in our midst hundreds of musicians but very few artists, we would perhaps set about in earnest remedying our musical sterility. Surrounded as we are by crowds of practising musicians, our sense of values has become strangely influenced by their limitations, and we are unable to take a comprehensive view of the evolution of the art and its possibilities of progress and development. The musician is too much in the picture and he has revealed an amazing capacity to throw music itself into the background. Such has been our laziness that we have not cared to go beyond the music of the past one hundred years, as though there was no music before 1830 and as though the composers of the last century had exhausted music for all time. It is, therefore, time we took stock of the situation and assayed our inheritance in intelligible terms, and found out whether we are progressing or retrogressing or merely marking time, notwithstanding our academies, music colleges, and conferences. Let us keep in mind that composers are but an episode in the history of our music, that musicians are at best carriers of burden merely, that music teachers are only drill sergeants in another sphere, and that the latter at any rate have little to do with the growth of the art.

Let me not be understood to decry the human medium that has preserved and transmitted our music in the past and will continue to do so in the future, but let us not exaggerate its role or confuse the handmaids of art with Art. One of the disadvantages of a system that is handed down from master to disciple is that, while there is undoubted continuity of tradition, originality tends to be discouraged as the system hardens and gets rigid in the course of ages. An ideal system would be that which retains all that is beautiful in the art of the past and at the same time allows unfettered scope for the imagination of the artist unborn, to rewrite it even, if he so desires. I attribute the dwarfing of talent in our times to this fact, among others, that our system has grown inelastic, that our musicians have got into a rut from which they know not how to extricate themselves. Music has come to mean a feat of memory largely, supported by a martyrdom of practice, and is but seldom the imaginative effort it ought to be. In other words, the disciple is an attenuated copy of the master, and *his* disciple a still feebler echo of the master's voice, and the

art is losing rapidly in breadth as well as in depth. The need of the times is rather a system which would give us disciples that excel the masters, a progressive system, in a word, uninfluenced by the short-comings of the agents who work it, which does not revolve in circles of blind repetition, but marches onwards from day to day and never takes rest; and in whose scheme of values the present is more important than the past and the future more important than the present. We want the musician to become a creative artist, to rely less on memory and more on imagination, to widen the scope and content of his art and multiply his resources of expression, instead of playing minor variations on a stale *repertoire*.

In recent years the feeling has gained strength that all is not well with our music and that something should be done—a feeling reflected in the music courses of our universities and

the colleges of music recently come into being—attempts to treat an undiagnosed disease with remedies at best of doubtful efficacy. The usual method in the past was for a student to apprentice himself to a master-craftsman for a stated period, the bulk of which was taken up by assiduous ‘exercising’ supplemented by a course of listening to eminent contemporary artists; the educative value of the latter was considered greater than that of the ‘practice’ itself. The most arduous part of the course was that of the ‘exercises’ and its purpose was to implant in the pupil a sense of pitch, rhythm, and tonal accuracy. So far as the essentials of the present day art are concerned, an adult of average intelligence and aptitude could master these in a year or two; but what he could not achieve within this period is proficiency in singing or playing, which is the reward of persistent effort spread over years, and the ripening of his own artistic judgment which is largely subconscious and which some people seem to be born with, but others never attain to even if they live to a hundred.

The problem of present-day art, as stated earlier, is one of diminishing returns; and part of the blame was assigned to the inelasticity of our system of instruction which was good enough for conservation but not good enough for creation and therefore called for change. Where is the benefit if our music colleges should copy the very system from which life is fleeing fast? If the course of instruction at the colleges is a duplicate of the course available outside, it is not only superfluous but needlessly expensive. It would have done absolutely nothing to check the spreading deterioration and has no solution to offer to the problem it set out to solve. If it is proposed to take the student through every recorded *Kriti* of Tyagaraja or Dikshita during the four or five years of the course, it is callous waste of the time of the teachers and the taught, because the aim of a musical seminary should be to make the pupil understand the basic principles, the types, and classes, and to encourage the student to develop his initiative by discovering for himself details and examples from extra-collegiate sources. As for the subconscious factor which is really the blossoming of the aesthetic consciousness of the artist, it is not a thing that could be imparted by a teacher, however eminent.

A word about our conferences. In the eighties of the last century, the late Mr. Singarachary made a present to the world of his catalogue of the 72 *melakartas* and their 'derivatives,' which the late Maha Vaidyanatha Iyer followed up by his well-known *Ragamalika*. This catalogue represents the *Sruti* and *Smriti* of the modern musician. It has never occurred to anyone to find out how or whence Mr. Singarachary got his revelation and whether before 1880 musicians had no introspective knowledge of their art and were content to practise something that was merely imitative and lacked a theoretic basis. Such was human credulity and so little was known of musical history that no one cared to verify the genuineness of his document, and every musical discussion from that time, whether in conferences or outside, is carried on in terms of Mr. Singarachary's terminology. Mythologists were not wanting to foist it on Narada who was said to have revealed it to Sri Tyagaraja himself! This is not the occasion to discuss all the consequences of this forgery, but it is certain that when we set about cleaning our Augean stables, one of the first things that will have to go is the crude and unhistorical nomenclature of Mr. Singarachary. Yet our exponents do not appear to have the shadow a doubt on this score, and not once has the question been raised or discussed in the series of conferences we are having from the days of Mr. Abraham Pandithar.

Let us remember that the musical art of the present day is not a modern invention, but a legacy from the past which it is our duty not only to conserve, but also intelligently understand and develop. There is extensive literature dating from very remote periods of our history, in Sanskrit and to a lesser extent in Tamil, having a close bearing on the modern art, a study of which is indispensable for a real grasp of South Indian music. A college is just the institution where this literature can be critically studied, the growth and development of our music visualised, the status and precise significance of modern music defined in relation to its past history and its future possibilities. A study of this literature would tell us exactly what we have lost or forgotten, and what we have gained or acquired, and what is in store in the future. An enquiry into the etiology of our *Ragas* and *Talas* and music-forms is not only pertinent, but highly necessary for a knowledge of Carnatic music. How many of our exponents are aware of the existence of this literature or its relation to modern art? How many of these have the equipment necessary for the task of interpreting these technical classics? A grammar of Indian music can be written only after all this labour is done, and it is on this that music colleges should concentrate if they care to be honest to themselves and to the art, and to lay their programme of work on sound lines with a syllabus that is above reproach. The mere musician ignorant of musical history and grammar (historical accidents are responsible for this ignorance) and his brother the technical expert of the conferences, are not the persons for our purpose so much as the grammarian who would define for us the facts of musical experience, and the historian who would tell us what was the contribution of the Hindus to musical thought. No doubt the musician has an important part to play, but our interest is in the art he represents and let us welcome light from other sources if the musician cannot give it. We do want the musician, because without his loving vigilance the art would not have survived at all, and he is still its greatest repository as well as guardian angel. But

in the circumstances of our music today, special importance attaches to him who would diagnose its maladies and give us his opinion whether the art is in enjoyment of normal health or diseased. Research into the history of our music and tradition is the supreme need of the hour, and if colleges and conferences have neglected it in the past, let us hope they will do so no longer.

Yet research is not without its dangers when it is mis-directed and leaves out of account the art that lives and the literature it has gathered round itself, and pursues a side track and misapplies Physics to problems which do not require its aid and builds up an elaborate edifice of ratios in the name of music. If anyone author has turned more men mad than any other, that author is Helmholtz; and the real menace to our music are his blundering students who read 20th century acoustics into 2nd century *Sutras* and want to 'repair' music generally, as if it were an umbrella or a clock.